Dear Alice,

I want to get more of both kinds of fiber (soluble and insoluble) into my diet, but to be honest, it's hard to consume the amounts of fruits and vegetables you need in order to get enough fiber.

I noticed that a lot of natural fiber beverage mixes (such as Metamucil) have both kinds of fiber. Is it okay to use these to supplement one's daily fiber intake? Is it safe to take such supplements on a daily basis?

Thanks.
Regular

Answer

Dear Regular,

Some of the fiber supplements (available in powder and pill forms) you are referring to are designed to help alleviate constipation, and are to be used for a limited time only. That's because if a person has chronic constipation, the cause needs to be determined. Other products can be used as supplements, as long as there are no underlying medical issues, such as chronic constipation. Two steps to determine how you use supplements are 1) read the labels carefully to find a fiber product that can be used daily, and 2) speak with your health care provider to determine if you should be taking a daily supplement.

For people who experience constipation or other irregularity with their bowel movements, some causes may be:

- Inadequate fiber consumption
- Lack of exercise
- Insufficient fluid intake
- Change in one's daily routine
- Ignoring the urge to move one's bowels
- Certain diseases
- Some medications
Luckily for you and anyone who needs more fiber, fruits and vegetables aren't the only good sources for getting more fiber into your diet. Here are some fiber boosting tips:

- Have a higher fiber cereal for breakfast? try to select one that contains at least 5 grams per serving.
- Add beans to salad, or dine on a cup of chili for lunch. Each ½ cup of beans contains 3 to 4 grams of fiber.
- Choose whole wheat bread, which has 2 grams of fiber per slice.
- Munch on berries (one serving = ½ cup), pears (1 medium with skin), and oranges (1 medium). If you eat just two servings of these a day, you'll add 7 to 8 grams of fiber.
- Snack on popcorn (go for air-popped). You get 1 gram of fiber per cup (equal to about 2 to 3 handfuls).
- Have a baked potato, which has almost 4 grams of fiber.
- Chomp on a medium carrot, which can add 2 grams of fiber.

Part of the benefit of getting fiber through food is that you will also take in the abundant vitamins, minerals, and plant chemicals (phytochemicals) that are present? you'll get lots of important nutrients, such as vitamin A, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folate, vitamin C, vitamin E, chromium, copper, iron, magnesium, potassium, and zinc; also in these foods are disease fighting plant chemicals, such as anthocyanins, alpha and beta-carotene, isoflavonoids, and phytosterols, among others.

If you do take a fiber supplement, you'll want to be careful because too much fiber can bind important minerals, such as calcium, iron, and magnesium, decreasing their absorption by the body. If you have more questions about your use of supplements, it would be a great idea to ask your health care provider, who knows your medical history and can recommend the best source of fiber for you.

Wishing you continued regularity,

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [2]
Optimal Nutrition [3]
Supplements & Ergogenic Aids [4]

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Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
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